



Exploring Power Dynamics: Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

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Abstract— Margaret Atwood, a renowned Canadian author, has explored the dynamics of power and its consequences, particularly with her female characters, in several of her novels. The dynamics of power are expertly portrayed by young girls in her novel *Cat's Eye*. By using her characters, Atwood deftly portrays the complex dynamics between school bullies and their victims, a theme that has been previously addressed by Graham Greene and William Golding. Constraints on idealism and oppression in all its forms are themes that run throughout *Cat's Eye*, as they have in Atwood's earlier novels. Atwood posits that women are not just the victims of patriarchal oppression. Women also perpetrate bullying and torment against their less privileged counterparts within their gender. She is subjected to bullying at school by three classmates: Cordelia, Carol, and Grace Elaine Risley, who has faced persecution since childhood, which has intensified during her adolescence. Her transient lifestyle led to her estrangement from her colleagues, making her vulnerable to her environment. Her traumatic memories were a persistent source of distress; however, she sought to reconcile with them through her artistic endeavours.

Keywords— power, gender, patriarchal, oppression, bullying, traumatic



Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 and lacked formal education during her early years, which led her to devote considerable time to reading. She completed her official education, earning both a bachelor's and a master's degree, and possesses honorary doctorates from numerous prominent universities. She was raised in a non-traditional family that prioritised her education and intellectual development over early marriage, unlike other females of her generation. Atwood is a distinctive author, one of the few whose works are included in academic literary curricula globally and simultaneously read by homemakers.

Atwood is well-known for her mythical themes and feminist views. She is renowned for her ability to convey both a personal vision and global concerns through her artwork. The narrative centers on women's artistic expression of their difficulties. She considers childhood cruelty, violence, and betrayal among young women in her retrospective tale. In this book, Atwood discussed feminism. Risley's development from childhood to adulthood is chronicled in this bildungsroman. This piece may also be referred to as a "Künstlerroman" because it follows Risley's artistic evolution. Atwood examines the process of victimisation starting in childhood in the book.

This paper aims to investigate the dynamics among women, focusing on the complexity of relationships in which women frequently suppress their identities. Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* explores the themes of memory and identity. Elaine, the heroine of the novel, is aware of the inherent uncertainty of recollection and how past experiences might influence our current life. The book is around the protagonist Elaine who tries to cope with her trauma, personal problems and fears to keep herself unique in the society.

Poets like Blake and Wordsworth often depict childhood as a pure and idyllic phase. However, it is important to recognise that children can also exhibit cruelty and indifference towards their peers. In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine Risley is obsessed with her past experiences and her relationship with Cordelia, her childhood pal and tormentor. She looks back to her past life, finding her individuality and identity. The book successfully intertwined the present and previous lives of the lead character. Furthermore, the protagonist's speech effectively embodies Atwood's creative perspective. She states, "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimension of space. If you can bend space, you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and

could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once" (3).

The relationship between Cordelia and Elaine illustrates a power dynamic in which Cordelia has consistently dominated Elaine from childhood. Cordelia compels Elaine to engage in self-reflection, Jordison quoted, "Cordelia brings a mirror to school ... She takes it out of her pocket and holds the mirror up in front of me and says 'Look at yourself! Just look! voice is disgusted'".

The story shows that authority and oppression are not confined to age or gender. Elaine's classmates, Cordelia, Carol and Grace, always pressurised her to fit into their mould and did not like her distinctiveness. They consistently maintain dominance and compel her to comply with their desires. Elaine recognises that she is being victimised by these females, although she is uncertain how to extricate herself from the situation. A renowned Critic stated, "Elaine is a surrogate victim, representative of the category 'girl' and thus a stand-in for the other girls, who use her as a scapegoat in order to displace their own suffering as members of patriarchy here literalized in the authority of their own fathers" (Hite 137).

As Cordelia is an integral part of herself, Elaine desires to destroy her. Cordelia is the most horrible of Elaine's three female colleagues who victimise her. During pivotal moments, she finds herself powerless, as she admits:

Now she's harsher, more relentless. It is as if she's driven by the urge to see how far she can go. She is backing me towards an edge, like the edge of cliff: one step back, another step and I'll be over and falling. (Atwood 171)

Elaine is even made to go fetch her hat after Cordelia tosses it into a ravine. Elaine finds the hard environment to be a difficult struggle. As snow accumulates in her shoes, she sees the Virgin Mary in a miraculous vision, giving her the strength to head back to safety. Then the females go to other schools. Elaine proves her cerebral superiority over Cordelia, who has mental illness and gains the reader's sympathies as the story goes on. Elaine, despite reaching adulthood and intellectual supremacy, cannot shake the ghosts of her past. Only many years of passionate devotion to art can lay her sad memories to rest.

The work exposes childhood difficulties but also the masculine bias to the artistic achievements of women. Professional artist Elaine Risley travelled to her former home of Toronto for a retrospective exhibition of her oeuvre. This is a journey in both the literal and figurative senses, and it is a retrospective look at Elaine's life, beginning with her youth and ending with the present day. With her inventiveness she dismantled the patriarchal narrative of art history that declares male dominance. She tried to establish new possibilities for female artists. The

novelist represents the marginalisation of women artists and their historical contributions by the patriarchal power structures. *Cat's Eye* opens a new phase in that it foregrounds a feminine artistic sense while projecting a powerful image of feminist consciousness.

Elaine acknowledges the marginalisation of female artists by their male counterparts. Notwithstanding the intrinsic worth of their contributions, they are regarded as inferior artists. Therefore, the piece demystifies the intricacies of the relationship between Elaine and Cordelia as well as acting as a powerful criticism of the patriarchal norms that discount the creative potential of women. resources that do not reward female ingenuity. The story contains a major metaphor related to retrospectives. Elaine finds it difficult to communicate with her brother because she believes that being a man, he is unable to comprehend the emotions of women. A retrospective is a completion, a culmination, or a viewpoint from which one may look back on the past. Elaine finds it challenging to talk to her mother owing to the distance. She states "is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It is filled with wordlessness" (Atwood 98).

Elaine hates being alone, and she instantly tries to get away by staying home from school, pretending to be sick, fantasising about invisibility, and deliberately fainting. Atwood writes, "there's a way out of places you want to leave but can't. Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up its late. Time has gone on without you" (183). Elaine's primary cause of sorrow stems from her chosen career; however, she longs for societal approval and recognition. Ultimately, she concluded that the painting profession is unsuitable for young girls. In that moment of realisation, she reflects, "Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized" (25).

Elaine had a disastrous relationship with Josef and subsequently falls for Jon, a painter. Jon's unfaithfulness destroys her dream existence with him forever. Her victimisation is compounded by her two spouses, Elaine's choice was to leave her spouse and go with her daughter, Sarah, to Vancouver. The complexity of inner conflict and self-identity is explored in the book *Cat's Eye*. The goal of Margaret Atwood's book is to demonstrate women's intelligence. The novelist demonstrates how the arts may be used to oppose injustice in any form.

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Alcott's *Little Women* might have impacted Atwood. Alcott's *Little Women* examines the development of four sisters. Despite the story's overall optimism, the four sisters must overcome many challenges to develop into healthy adults. But rather than being related by blood, the schoolgirls in *Cat's Eye* are

only associated by their “friendship”. The characters in Atwood's works often lack the genuine friendship typically found among siblings. Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* have some striking similarities. In *To The Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe is an inexperienced young painter. She attempts to depict James and Mrs. Ramsay in a painting. Charles Tansley's chauvinist claim that women are incapable of writing or painting exacerbates her self-imposed uncertainty about her artistic abilities.

Lily struggles to complete her painting during the journey to the lighthouse at the book's conclusion. She recalls memories from her past, including her enduring thoughts about Mrs Ramsay and life in general. Lily gains the understanding she needs to complete her painting from this reflection. As she completes the painting, she feels truly satisfied. Elaine and Lily are quite similar. Patriarchal society suppresses the artistic talents of both artists and creates in both artists self-doubt and other crises. Ultimately, both artists can showcase their gifts, fulfil their artistic missions, and establish their own identities as creators.

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